

Reflections



REFLECTIONS

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CONTEST

Each year the English Department of Gardner-Webb sponsors a literary contest for the student works chosen for publication in **Reflections**. All works are judged anonymously by the **Reflections** staff and the final judges. This year's final judges were professor E.M. Blankenship, Dr. Bill Stowe, and Ms. Dot Jackson. Faculty and non-student submissions were not eligible for the contest.

AWARDS

1st Place:	SHEPHERD'S FIELD REVISITED	Thomas Perry Hildreath III
2nd Place:	STARFIRE	Melissa Lail
3rd Place:	AS I SIT	Ilene Allinger

HONORABLE MENTION:

CAUGHT IN A TIME WARP	Amanda E. Thomas
O CHILD OF ROCK AND WIND	Melissa Lail
THE OLD WOMAN	Rebecca Jones

AS I SIT

As I sit,
pondering the central limits theorem,
You come gently
into my mind.

You stand quietly,
(much like a child in a toy store)
waiting patiently
(as a bridegroom on his wedding night)
for me to notice you.

With difficulty,
(as great as breathing)
You wrest my thoughts
(ha!)
from the central limits theorem.

Then,
you calmly lower yourself
(as a leaf down Niagara)
into my heart.
You softly urge me,
(à la Patton)
to cease my pondering
(of the central limits theorem)
and think of you.

And so,
(with every fiber of my being)
(with every filament of my soul)
I do.

Ilene Allinger

GOD'S CIRCUS CLOWN

A dancing doll on a ferris wheel
who never knew a world that was real
and chose to live in one of her own—
that was my life until you came along.

A three-ring circus without any clowns,
but filled, instead, with tears and frowns;
no ring-master, tightrope, or flying trapeze,
and not even the music of a cool summer breeze:

a day without sunshine, a song without words,
the saddest silence never heard;
a word with no meaning, a sky with no blue,
a life with no purpose, a me with no you.

. . . Then . . .

A rainbow of color, a circus with clowns,
music and laughter erasing the frowns!
Sunshine and happiness, words for my song,
blue skies and purpose when you came along!

I know you were always here, reaching to me,
but the world's many pleasures made me too blind to see!
Now I know happiness takes many forms,
but the greatest of these was a crown made of thorns.

Why did they treat you so cruel and unreal?
The pain that you suffered was so much to feel!
Why did they make you a martyr this way?
Your own precious blood was such a high price to pay!

But with the life you gave for me,
you proved to us all that you really were he
who came from above to save from sin
and, in three days, would rise again!

Thank you for painting a beautiful sky
and putting the sparkle back in my eyes;
for being Ring Master of the circus in town
and erasing the tears from the face of your clown!

Lisa Atkins

BALLOONING IN TUNE

We move into the truth of spring
With agile swing and supple step
Bursting with joy of happy growth
Ballooning and keeping in tune with the wind.

The sun smiles warmly to slow the pace
It adds to the grace but complicates
The effort to fly in the calm dry heat
But we still continue to balloon in tune.

Puffing and blowing, setting afloat;
Twisting and turning, holding in check;
Flowing softly, slowing down;
We balloon, balloon, balloon.

A giddy loon attempting to fly
Or a rank buffoon that won't even try
Out of place we stick and stir
And place our limbs in a neutral gear, ballooning.

Dancing without music
Sweeping cares away with the debris
Carefree and happy, we chase dreams
With or without reason, still ballooning in tune.

As we stride through the seasons to maturity,
The harvest is brought to a Thanksgiving fire
Where we continue feasting in the breeze of fruition
Until we balloon out of tune.

Ernest Blankenship

ANTIPODES

It cannot continue with all the miles between,
and moments left unshared . . .

His mouth speaks these words and her face twists and
contorts, a single pearl scurries down her cheek, yet she
is restrained . . . His lips form the awaited words, only
silence comes.

They are separated by a veil which has changed from crystal
into murky darkness, and remains impermeable . . .

As she rises to leave, his eyes plead the antithesis of
his words.

Roberta Borden

EULOGY

He spat out desperate little words
against the finitude of human understanding.

He spoke of the awesome gap
between theology and science,
between heaven and hell.

He asked us to peer into the darkness
of our innermost secret sinful hearts

Where I saw a gentle bearded man
gliding his canoe among cypress knees
under circling ospreys
through still, polished waters

Teaching a child the miracle
of lily pads
of golden club
of old man's beard
and alligator smiles.

Joyce Brown



DUSK IN THE SPRING

Black trees sit still upon
The lavender blue canvas.
Orange building lights
Enhance structure.

Deep, green grass is cool
And as inviting as
a tall sprinkler
during an afternoon run.

White flowered trees
Glow with their frosting.
Birds sing swiftly
Before the last light.

The world is still
As the sun bursts into
A million flaming dots.
Gentle, gentle is dusk in the spring.

Krista Colle

PARADE

A diesel truck moves
 through the street
 in low-gear'd solemnity

Bearing on its flat-bed stage
 a Christmas vision from
 Rita's School of Dance:

Joseph and Mary cringe within the crèche
 before the electric thud and crash
 of rock and roll.

A stereophonic Star
 croones, "Beat it,"
 to fiberglass baby Jesus

who

does not awaken
does not obey
does not cry out at flashing feet
 above the Lamb.

Joyce Brown

DIAMONDS, DIRT, AND DANCES

Diamonds pierced my ears
The night of long dresses and vests.
But I wore sweat and a red bandana.

You watched while I played
Our night together planned,
But overthrown, or not?

Under lights not on a dance floor
Late evening turned to night.
Schoolmates danced in pairs.

I danced with nine others
While you sat, a wall flower,
On a splintered sideline seat.

We gained no trophies
Though we brought in the new day.
All was lost but the mind's etchings.

Diamonds pierced my ears
The night of long dresses and vests.
Because cleats did not matter

Not a film coated neck.
A stone cut for me,
You sparkled in your giving.

Krista Colle

HAND IN HAND

Walking along a sandy beach.
Listening to the resounding crash of the waves.
The bright moon glittering on the water.
My hand in yours.

Feeling a cool breeze blowing in off the ocean.
Seeing the lights of a ship passing by.
The sound of birds in the air.
Your hand in mine.

Watching the moon sink beyond the horizon.
Catching a glimpse of the sun coming up.
A new day begins.
Hand in hand, together.

Stephen Hamrick

SHEPHERD'S FIELD REVISITED

And lo the Angel of the Lord came
upon them and they were full of fear and
trembling.

And the Angel said unto them

“Hey y'all —

you better be scared

cause over yonder in Bethlehem

a baby's been born

and he ain't no ordinary baby.

He's really gonna stir things up.

Ya better be scared.

He's really gonna mess things up for a lot
of people.

You just wait and see what's gonna happen

You just ain't gonna believe it . . .

You just ain't gonna believe it!”

Thomas Perry Hildreath, III

“ODE TO VIETNAM”

There were no bands, no ticker tape
Not even so much as a hand to shake,
There was no welcome mat this time
When Johnny came marching home.

They fight their home front battles well
As still they live in there captive hell,
There was no love this time
When Johnny came marching home.

You say you're sorry now my friends
But what can you do now my friends?
For the men didn't cheer
And the boy's didn't shout
And the ladies,
None of them turned out
And who felt gay this time . . .
When Johnny came marching home?

John Hunt

THERE WAS A TIME

There was a time when evening shadows were long,
And the nights were filled with silent
Thoughts and sacred moments of solitude.
When the clanging of civilization was drawn
To a halt as twilight descended . . .
And it was assumed by all that peace should prevail.
When the gentle dusk could be heard as
It settled its dewy kiss on the evening rose.

It was an age when time was of no consequence,
And the ticking of clocks sounded merely
As lullabies for slumbering babes.
It was an age when porch swings rocked,
And crickets chirped, and old folks had their say
As they leisurely fanned away the summer heat
With accordion pleated fans.

It was a time when stars were still for wishing,
And moonlight still held the promise of love.
When privately held dreams bore the essence
Of hopeful anticipation, and there were no
Fears of holocaust around every bend.
And you knew that you were safe when you
Pulled down the shades at night and quietly
Padded off to bed in slippery stocking feet.
And when you closed your eyes, you slept
A dreamless sleep, snug in your bed, with
The assurance that there would dawn a new day,
And that you would be a part of it.

But then came jet lag, five-second hamburgers,
Digital clocks, and a kind of Pac Man mentality
That views the world through a different scope.
And civilization could no longer be expected to
Shut down at five o'clock, or sunset,
Whichever came first.
There were now deals to be made, and places to go,
And you made them, and you went.

But along the way you lost something more
Precious than big deals and the seven wonders
Of the modern world. You lost the essence of
Your soul amidst the skyscrapers and interstate
Highways, "drive-thru" windows and five-second meals.
And now you awake to find that there has indeed
Dawned a new day, but it is not the same
As the day before, and it is not what you expected.
Now when night comes, you quietly pull the shades,
But you no longer know that you are safe.
The assurance is gone.
So slowly you pull the covers over your head
. . . And silently weep.

Violet Rebecca Jones

THE OLD WOMAN

The dazzling lights and laughing joy
Are gone now from her fading blue eyes.
Fallen like so many orbs of golden sun
As it slips into the gentle dusk of twillight.
And there beneath the wrinkled lines and folds
Hides a face once fresh with youthful dew.

Which once reflected sublime thoughts of
Idealistic dreams and contemplations of
Remedies for the world.
But now is filled with somber images
And thoughts wizened with the years,
Along with the bittersweet memories of
Elusive hopes that were never fulfilled.

Her voice crackles now,
Broken by the sobbing of tears long shed.
And she rocks to and fro,
Seldom leaving her chair beside the fire
Where she quietly knits, and awaits
Her appointed time.
Not filled with apprehension, or hope
Of postponement,
But merely accepting what will be.

Quietly marking time and waiting . . .
For the day when she will again be
Filled with youthful joy and laughter.

Violet Rebecca Jones

IN THE HEART OF NATURE

Your ominous presence looms before me,
and you firmly rule my life.
You dictate when I battle forward,
or when I stay and hold my ground.
You hurl your icy darts my way.
They pierce and chill my every vein.

Your heavenly tears trickle downward
upon the parched crust
and form scattered, mirrored pools.
Then you clutch your drenched hands
and create a marshy, green rug.

But yet, you give a luster to my day.
Your carpet becomes a sponge, and
you signal me with a special symbol,
a mere smile bending backwards
wearing the coat of Joseph.

Your existence is precious
even with all your weatherbeaten weapons.
You persist in bestowing your seasoned knowledge.
Your storms and serenity remain with me, and
You are His creation.

Karen Kistler



POETIC RESPONSE

Once upon a wintertime
I wrote a poem that did not rhyme
It did not really please my friends

but so what
that's not what
poetry's for

And so this time it will not rhyme
it will not deal with reason or season

or time
or animals
or plants
or anything

It will be a nothing poem
with no real meaning
with nothing really to say

(if you can write a poem
that has nothing to say)

no message to this day and age
it shall be a modern poem with no sense
of rhyme — even the lines
will not be the same I e n g t h
That will make my friends upset

but that has not
bothered me yet.

Thomas Perry Hildreath, III



Caught in a time warp, as it is.
I hang suspended between two worlds.
Not able to fully enter one
And not desiring to fully enter the other.
I live as a sort of refugee from another time and land.
No one able or willing to share my heritage.
Nights I lie awake yearning for my homeland;
Days are spent dreaming of the lands never
 experienced but known better than one who
 dwells there.
My soul dwells there.

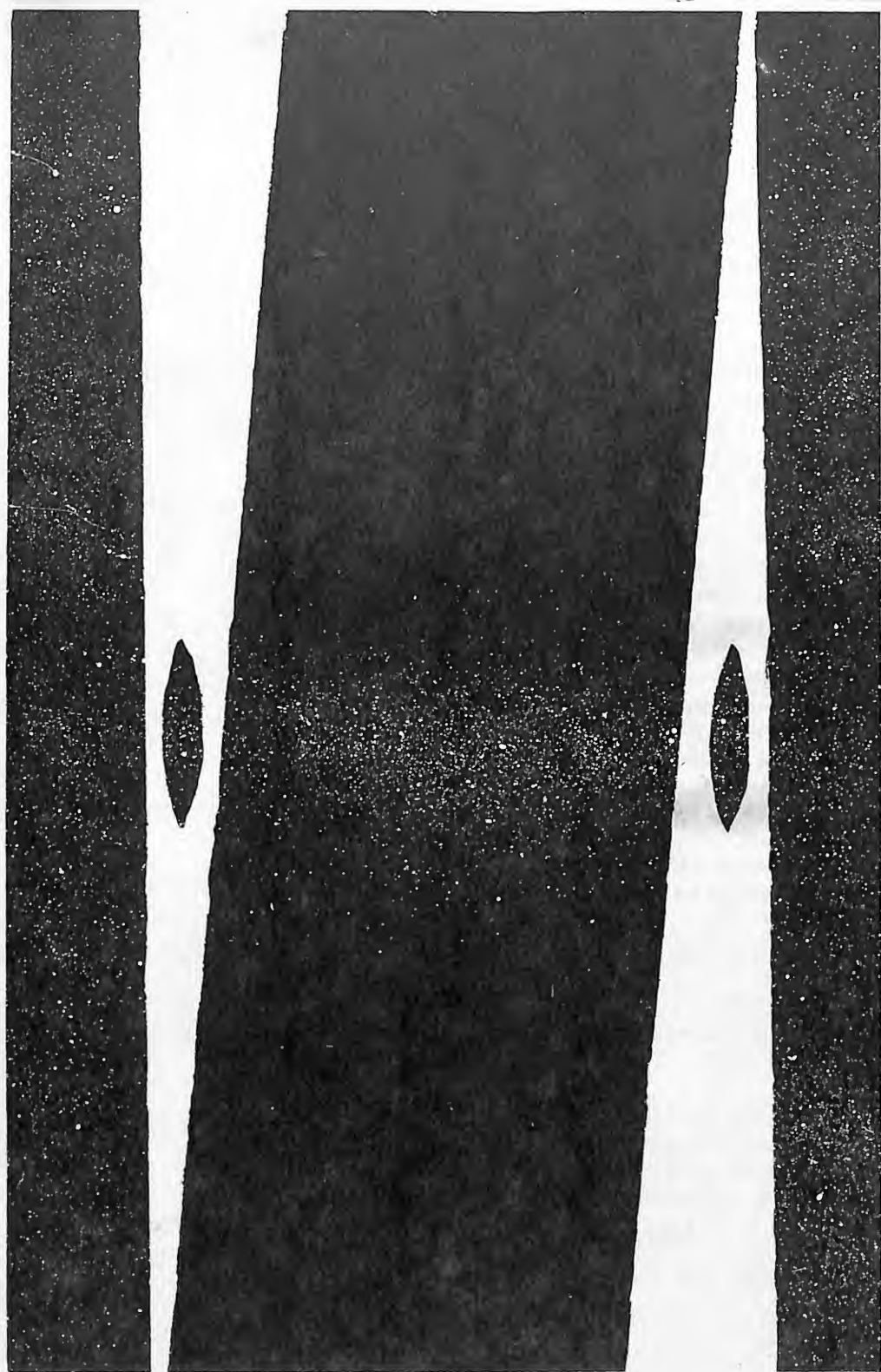
Listen.
Can you hear them?
Silent cries of a million images floating in my mind.
I know them well, for I live with them:
Green Arthurian mists embracing the emerald hills
 and dark forests of a forgotten Avalon;
A small golden-beached atoll surrounded by cool
 azure waters;
Snow capped mountains towering majestically over tiny
 villages.

Those with me can't reach these images.
They cry to be free from the darkened pool of my
 mind into the bright, sunlit stream.
I strive to let them go, but each key I try
 won't fit the lock.
The door remains bolted, beyond my power to
 liberate.
They cry louder and louder, the volume rising
 to a deafening roar.
I must deliver them now!!
But wait . . . silence.
For now, they sleep.

Stranger, a stranger in a strange land.
The surroundings familiar to the mind, yet
 alien to the soul.
A spiritual somnambulist drifting through the world
 in which I exist, yet don't live.
Treading the spiderweb threads between marked
 individuality and despairing loneliness; between
 whimsical oddity and borderline insanity.
A sudden ebullition of joy and delight leaving the will low.

Ecce Homo!
With hyperborean heart you examine.
Dare you judge? dare you condemn?
Enter any world, live my dreams, experience my visions;
Then we'll judge together.
Til then . . .

Amanda E. Thomas



An open yearbook.

It is a journey into the past, and future.

Not of a life, but an attitude.

A smile here, a grin across the page and
a surprised look as the camera catches
one off-guard.

Look behind the full faces to the empty souls

You don't know any of these; you never did.

A name, a few irrelevant facts: yearbook editor,
captain of the swim team, Homecoming
Queen runner-up.

These never were people to you.

You never saw them cry.

You never shared the joy of a tiny achievement
of that retarded boy walking down the hall.

You never heard the lonely despair of the girl
you called "nerd" who had no friends.

You never knew of the death of a brother, or the
illness of a parent, or the agony of an addiction.

You never had time for the guy who had everything;
a car, new clothes, a large house, lots of money;
everything except love and caring parents.

You never spoke to the girl who lived below your standards
and values.

You never offered a shoulder or volunteered a hand.

You never let your Lord shine on anyone else.

("They're doing O.K. They don't want to hear.")

You never cared.

You've heard this all before, but said, "It's someone
else's responsibility."

Do it again.

"And the King shall answer and
Say unto them, verily I say unto you, Inasmuch
as ye have done it unto one of the least of
these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

Matthew 25:40

Amanda E. Thomas

LOVE'S BITTER LETTER

I am the letter in pain's envelope.
The address says TO MY KING.
The senders, a bruised heart and a crushed spirit.
The postage paid by anger.

The words reveal stagnation
From a lover's unbelief.

Unable to keep giving
For my actions are a rubber ball
Bouncing off the wall of your resistance.

She thinks my eyes brilliant!
I said the same several times
Your rejection silenced me.

I treat you like a queen.
I feel a beggar you've missioned to feed and tend
And then I am to praise your every effort.

Seal the letter now with a resentful kiss.
My saliva the pus that oozes from my wounds.

Krista Colle

O child of rock and wind,
Sowing flowers of the air
An autumnal birth
Leaving yourself stark and bare.

Divested of your summer garments
Raising fingers to the winter skies
Are you listening to the singing?
Do you hear the cold wind's cry?

Finally at this season's end, this autumn, this fall,
You stepped beyond the edge of summer
Your roots upon the void
Of starry skies and dusky glimmer of a universe's fall.

Sow your golden flowers in the green grass
Leave the summer; it is past.
Reach to the winter skies
And sing to the stars as the cold wind cries.

Melissa Lail

THE FLAME

Light drips slowly
down upon the earth.
The sky is shattered
by a blooming field of fire.
A tornado of light
rages through the heavens
shredding the black veil.

The blazing ember slowly dies.
The shades are drawn
by immortal hands,
gleaning the final crumbs of day,
but nature's lights
quench the dreaded darkness.

ROSE

Layers of velvet
cherry-ripened red,
twirled like cotton candy
on a dainty, green finger.
Glazed with morning sugar.
Inn of a solitary visitor
humming a busy melody.

Karen Kistler

STARFIRE

The foamy salt-white horses plunge and
 leap
 Then dive,
And their passage to Charon's realm
 is marked by the well of liquid
 Crystal
Pouring upward into fluid diamonds
 that catch at Old Man's silver beams.
An undulating white-gold track streaks
 the mashed blanket of sapphires.
 Eluding, Shimmering,
 enticing ever onward
The heart-caught wanderer,
 Opening vistas to the soul-seekers.
Starfire blazes, then settles to indigo ashes
 Caught in the gleaming seas below.

Melissa Lail

YOU CAN'T SMILE ENOUGH

You smile inside —
With laughter-tears-contentment
The heart — your throat
Warmth, excitement, bubbling feelings
... when you can't smile enough

A child's achievements
Enchantment of West Side
Births of Spring
Victory in competition
... when you can't smile enough

Your mouth is too small
When you can't smile enough
Expressions-Secrets-Memories
Irreplaceable Time Shared
... with you I can't smile enough

Lou Ann Poston

THE DAY THE SKY WAS DEAD

Once there was life
There is now nothing but darkness
The sun was cast away
The moon hid her face in shame
And all the stars and angels mourned
The day the sky was dead.

Earth, joyous lovely Earth
The jewel of all the galaxies
The pride of all God's mighty works
The keeper of Earth, mankind
God and all the angels rejoiced
The day of your creation.

Man has a new pal
They call her name Silverbird
East says to West,
"My pet is far more lovely,
And try to count her offspring."
West responds to East,
"My pet is lovelier than yours,
And her offspring embrace the world."

The daring speak:
Go away Silverbird
Go away Firefly
For your wings beat death
And your tail great destruction.
Let us live in peace.
They are ignored.

From East or West's house,
What does it matter?
Silverbird and her children flew.
Our lovely Earth is now no more.
Destiny changes

Once there was life
There is now nothing but darkness.
The sun was cast away
The moon hid her face in shame
And from the heights I mourned with grief
The day the sky was dead.
And all the stars and angels mourned
The day the sky was dead.

THE DEATH OF WILLIAM BONNEY

hunted down at night by
Pat Garrett, bar keep

Quien es? Quien es? whispered the Kid
and drew his gun in the dark;
it's Patrick, Billy,
cock's cry dawns: you spilt the wine,
I claim the flesh.

MORTALITY

when a calf first bawls
and earns mother's lick,
does he see beyond a nose
happily wet
the butcher's smile?

David Robertson

THE ALL SEASON MASK

Although it is not October,
I wear a mask
Not to cover my face,
Just my feelings.
I keep them hidden,
So I get no recognition,
Nor pain.
Just once I'd like to remove that mask,
So I could live, love and cry once more.

... dedicated to
Laura

Tracy Stonerod

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL — 1967

For the first time in my life, I felt a certain security in darkness. The heavy hands of blackness caressed me with the warmth and tenderness of a midnight mother. I lay in fearful anticipation of sunrise—a birth of light which would deliver me into a new and different world. The next day was to be my first day of school.

I spent what seemed an eternity bathing in a tub of muddy imagination. My brother, Ricky, had gone to the extreme to prepare me for this day. He would be entering the third grade this year and I relied heavily on his words of wisdom. I had been extra nice to him throughout the summer in order to solidify our relationship. I even made up his bed for the entire month of August.

In my present prone position, I began to recall all the frightening accounts of school life told to me by Ricky. My fabricated image of Mrs. Pope, the first grade teacher at Waco Elementary School, provided my greatest source of unease. My brother had depicted her as the meanest, ugliest old woman that I would ever see. He said that each year, on the first day of school, she would pick one boy to be her slave. This unfortunate child would be chained to a radiator and forced to eat bugs which ventured near him. I thought this would be a good job for my cousin Robbie because he often ate flies that hung from our grandpa's ceiling. Finally, after a long period of adolescent deliberation, I drifted into dreamland.

The scent of sizzling bacon and cinnamon rolls entered my dormant nose and lured me back into reality. Bright sunlight was the first thing I noticed. The moon, which served as my ally throughout the night, had coldly forsaken me. A stack of newly bought clothes awaited the arrival of my rebellious body. Reluctantly, I donned the uniform and prepared to do battle in the field of first grade confrontation.

After a brief period of rearranging my breakfast, I picked up my satchel and joined Ricky in his usual spot by the mailbox. For two years I had stood reverently out of sight and watched Ricky occupy this turf alone. Now I would be his cowardly companion standing like a convicted man before his executioner.

I remembered hearing my preacher once tell about a woman turning into salt when she turned around to look at the place she was leaving. I was scared that the same thing might happen to me if I looked back. But I finally decided it was worth the risk. As I turned around, something, an inescapable force, drew my eyes to the screen door and fixed them upon the watery eyes of my mother. Why was she crying? Did she know something that I didn't? Was she crying because this was the last time she would see me alive?

I wanted desperately to run to her and escape the fear of education. But suddenly, I was frozen in place by an unfamiliar outcry of sound. A frightened glance revealed the steady approach of a huge, orange machine with flashing red lights. Why did it appear to be so violent and uncaring? Last year, as I watched from my haven of security, the school bus had arrived like a soft, purring kitten coming to rest on a velvet pillow. But today, with me a part of its morning diet, it rushed upon us like a hunger-driven tiger roaring its vengeance with monstrous might. All I knew to do was follow my brother.

Although there were several empty seats in the tiger's belly, I chose to sit with my brother. I could tell this threatened Ricky's third-grade coolness, but I wasn't about to move. After stealing several glances, I discovered that I knew no one else on the bus. I felt sick on my stomach. I wished that I could open my mouth wide and spew out all my fears and inhibitions — but I could not.

The bus ride felt like an eternity. Each stop produced an unfamiliar face. The bus was nearly full of unsuspecting prey. Suddenly, I realized that everyone here was white! My father had warned me that some of the children at school would be black. But maybe he was wrong. Why should I see black children at school? No, they would not come. They would be in the fields picking cotton like always. Now I had one less thing to worry about.

But then it happened. We made one final stop near the school which affirmed my father's belief. The bus was flooded by a large, black wave which washed away my sands of security. White children crowded together leaving two vacant seats for the strange arrivals. They sat there like little black statues, neither moving nor speaking. I felt a welcomed relief. Their presence moved me up a rung on the ladder which had proved almost impossible to scale before. My situation appeared unimportant. These were the ones who were rightfully reserved on this day. They were the tiger's true prey!

E. Welton Stamey

ROSES ARE RED, MEMORIES ARE BLUE

Words are not common between the old man and his grandson. The boy stands quietly on the porch steps, slowly chewing on a stick of licorice. His grandfather ceases his rhythmical rocking and leans over to spit a black stream of juice into an empty lard can. Conversation between the two usually begins with a sudden question directed from the ten year old to his seventy year old elder.

Today, the youth's curiosity is aroused by the loud rumbling of a low-flying jet. He breaks the licorice stick in two with his stained teeth, stuffs the other half in his shirt pocket, and turns around to face the old man. His youthful voice is a much needed knife slicing through the monotony of unspoken moments.

"Grandpa, have you ever flown in one of those?" "No boy, I ain't never grown no rose. Your grandma used to raise 'em though, when she was here to look after 'em. They used to grow like hell around the henhouse." He points a stiff finger across the yard at the few remaining coops. "Chicken shit has always been the best thing for growing flowers."

The boy does not bother to ask his grandfather again. He simply turns back around and stares at the thin white trail which marks the path of the departed aircraft. He wishes that he had kept watching the jet instead of turning around just to hear his grandfather tell about growing roses.

"Damned roses!" yells the youngster. He picks up a piece of broken brick and hurls it towards the chicken coops.

The old man leans forward and strikes his grandson across the back with his cane. "Don't you know better than to cuss boy? Just 'cause you're ten years old don't mean you can cuss. What ya got agin' roses anyway?" A stream of tobacco juice drips from his parted lips onto the clean landscape of a white, starched shirt.

"Why shouldn't I be able to cuss? You cuss all the time. All you do is sit around in that damned chair and cuss. I didn't wanna hear about roses anyway. I asked you about flyin' in airplanes. Who gives a shit about roses anyway?"

The old man reaches out with the cane again but this time the boy moves out of range. "I got reasons to cuss; you don't. I'm old, and nobody gives a damn about old people. I can't hardly walk no more. Nobody comes to see me regular 'cept a couple stray dogs and you. Your grandmother died, then the roses died, and it won't be long 'fore I die, too. So that's why I sit around all day in this damned chair and cuss. What else have I got to do?"

His grandson swallows hard, turns slowly around, and looks hopelessly into the watery eyes of his grandfather. "You can tell me about when the roses used to grow by the henhouse."

The old man spits sharply into the lard can, lays down his cane, and leans slowly back into the chair again. "I never had much talent for growin' flowers, but your grandma sure did. She used to spend her spring mornings diggin' around by the henhouse. Them roses grew like hell when she was here to look after 'em. Did you know roses grow best in chicken shit? They say . . ."

The approach of a jet plane can be heard above the soft voice of the old man, but the boy does not turn to watch. He takes the piece of licorice from his shirt pocket, sticks it between two wet lips, and listens to his grandfather tell about the days when roses used to grow around the henhouse.

E. Welton Stamey

CANASTA GAME

"Hey there, everybody. We just couldn't wait until you got here," bubbled Emma Lou as she led Stanley and her three children through the carport door. "It seems like ages since you were down here and it has finally happened and we're going to have a marvelous time. I told Stanley that there wasn't nothin' like being with your kin when they come down on vacation and all the kids can play together 'cause they like each other so much. Hey, Francine. Don't you just love having Julie home again so you can sit up all night talking girl talk? Just wish I could join you but I don't get off much so I need my beauty rest. Well, don't stand there, sister-in-law. Give Emma Lou a big hug. That's a girl. And there you are, Ralph. Umm. Big squeeze just for me."

"I see you've had your tongue reconditioned again," replied Ralph.

"There you go again," laughed Emma Lou. "Can't bear to say anything nice about me. Why'd you marry the old sourpuss, Julie?"

"Just something about him," she replied. "Must have been his sense of humor."

"Heh-heh," chuckled Stanley. "Fore she trapped him all she had to pick on was me. Ol' boy did me a favor."

"Ranlo, you stay out of the refrigerator," shouted Emma Lou. "Your Maw Maw's got us a big supper ready. I tell you, that boy's only six but he eats like a teenager, and I already got two of those."

"I heard that, Mama. Stop talking about us," complained Jenny Lou.

"Hey, Pa. Did you see what Uncle Ralph's got? It's a new Pontiac," said Bascom. "What about it, Uncle Ralph? Let me and Gurn take a ride after supper. Huh?"

"He's already ridden in it," said Ralph.

"I've got my license now. I'm a good driver."

"Now don't bother your Uncle Ralph, Bascom," ordered Emma Lou. "He's probably worn out from all that driving yesterday."

"Ha!" exclaimed Julie sarcastically. "The poor boy drove the first hundred miles and then said he was sleepy. First thing I knew he was snoring away and I had to drive through Atlanta. He knows I hate to drive there. Did it on purpose, too, just to provoke me."

"Not true, wife," Ralph defended himself. "Can't be too safe. Wouldn't want me falling asleep at the wheel, would you?"

"Everybody get ready to eat," called Francine.

Later, Stanley rubbed his belly and pushed back his chair. "That was doggone good, Ma. When you gonna give Emma here some lessons?"

"Keep that up and you'll be eating with the dog," snapped his wife. "Ain't it just like men to brag on their mamas' cooking, Julie? One time I fixed him beef stroganoff and do you know what he said? He said, 'It needs more salt,' that's what he said. Then he put ketchup on it."

"Ah, she's just talkin'," protested Stanley. "No better cook anywhere than my Emma Lou."

"Kiss her and make up, Stanley," interjected Ralph, getting up from the table.

Julie stopped him. "You want to canasta, Ralph? Emma Lou says they've been looking forward to it for weeks."

"Oh, lord," moaned Ralph. "You mean we got to go through all that again?"

Francine shouted, "Gurney; keep that door closed or the cat will get in."

"He's done in, Maw Maw," announced Ranlo solemnly.

"Lordy, lordy. Last time he did it in my closet and I had to sleep in Stanley's room. Bascom, get Feawess out of the house."

"I want to drive Uncle Ralph's car," whined Bascom.

"Find the cat, Bascom," said his mother.

"Why can't Jenny Lou do it? I'm sixteen and she's only thirteen. I got seniority."

Ralph smirked and placed his hands on the back of Julie's chair. "Well, I see that you folks are raising some profound thinkers."

"I got him, Maw Maw," cried Ranlo, rushing to the table with a squirming cat held above his head. "Now you be good, Feawess, and do what Maw Maw says or she won't give you no more Purina."

"Stanley, see if you can find the cards," said Emma Lou. "Julie and me'll help Francine clean up."

"I don't know where they are,"

"Look in the end table," suggested Francine.

Ralph headed toward the den. "Maybe there's a football game on TV."

"Ralph, you said you'd play canasta," Julie reminded him.

"Didn't do it," he retorted. "You just asked me."

"Well, you will, won't you? We never get to play except when we're down here."

"I can't find them things."

"Look in the living room closet, Stanley," yelled his mother. "On-ly time I see them is when Ralph and Julie are here."

"Can I play, Mama? I'll be good."

"Not this time, Ranlo. You don't know how."

"But how can I learn if no one will teach me?"

"You can come watch sugar, or play a game with Jenny Lou and Wanda."

"Mama! Don't put him off on us," pleaded Jenny Lou. "He's always bug'in' me."

"Is this them in the blue and white colors? We don't need but one deck, do we?"

"We gotta have two decks, Stanley. Keep looking."

"Hey, Stanley," yelled Ralph, his eyes on the television. "Next time why don't you volunteer to find the cat instead."

"I don't see you doing anything," mocked Julie, turning from the sink.

"I'm a-weary from all the driving," sighed Ralph, pulling up the foot rest. "Where's my toddy, Francine?"

"My feet are killin' me," she complained, stopping in front of Ralph's chair. Then, lowering her voice, "Now, Ralph, you always asked me to tell you what Julie wants for Christmas, and she's got her heart set on a microwave. I been talkin' to her and she won't be happy with anything else."

"We don't need one of those things," Ralph huffed, stretching his neck to see around her. "Waste of money when we've already got a perfectly good oven sitting in the kitchen."

Stanley returned from the living room. "I got another deck but they're all stuck together."

"Wash them," suggested Ralph.

"And do you know why they're stuck together, Ralph Tutter? It's because you gorged yourself on peppermint sticks last time we played," said Emma Lou, waving a finger. "Francine, hide the candy from Ralph until we finish the game."

Francine, lying on the couch, mumbled something.

"Get me a toddy and I'll forego all other pleasures," grinned Ralph. "I'll even lower my bedtime expectations."

"I heard that," howled Julie. "and if you don't shut up I'll put this dishrag to good use."

"Drunkard! lecher!" spit out Emma Lou on her way back to the kitchen.

"Where we gonna play?" asked Stanley.

"In the living room, same as always," replied his wife. "Get Ralph to help you take the children's table in there," referring to the old kitchen table that Francine had had sawed down for the grandchildren years ago.

"I've never figured out why we have to use that thing," grumbled Ralph. "We look like a bunch of Japanese. Might as well take off our shoes and wave chop sticks around."

"Mmm," from the couch.

"We'll be there in a minute," said a voice from the kitchen as the men eased the table through the door. "Get the cards dealt."

Stanley sank on the couch, drew the table close, and began separating the cards. "They ain't stuck as bad as I thought. Maybe you could sneak some of that peppermint in here while the ol' gal's sleepin'. Wouldn't mind a little chaw myself."

Entering the living room, Emma Lou insisted, "And I tell you I will not sit next to Ralph, Julie. He drives me up the wall with all those weird discards. And he always gets the black threes."

"Well, I have to live with him all the time and the least you can do is spare me one night."

"And he always picks on me—"

"And he tries to go out with a concealed hand and makes me all nervous—"

"And it makes me so mad when he picks up a big pile when I've made a good discard—"

"I'll tell you what. We'll draw and the low one will have to sit to his left and the other to the right. Stanley always sits across from him anyway. Give me the cards, Stanley."

"But I done shuffled them."

"This is important. You draw first, Julie."

"What did you get?" asked Julie.

"A jack."

"Ha! I got a king," gloated Julie. "But I don't guess it makes much difference whether you discard to him or he does it to you. Same misery."

"Stanley, change places with me—please," pleaded Emma Lou.

"I'm comfortable. Couldn't get up if I tried."

"Crappity-crap," fumed Emma Lou. "You better behave, Ralph."

"And no fast stuff," ordered his wife.

"I've never heard such blather," protested Ralph. "You females invite me to play and then make me feel like the poor old cat. But now that we've got a game up I'll just be my natural self and try to win best I can, all above board."

Julie nodded vigorously. "That's the problem: You'll be your natural self."

Stanley looked baffled, "Now how many of these things do I got to deal?"

"I think it's thirteen each if four play. Or is it eleven? I forget."

"Deal eleven, Stanley," instructed Ralph. "Why do we always start like this? You people couldn't remember yesterday's weather."

"There he goes," complained Emma Lou with a glare.

"Now let me get this straight," drawled Stanley, sorting his cards after dealing. "How much is aces?"

Emma Lou became teacher. "Aces count twenty, so do twos. Jokers are fifty, kings through nine are ten and the rest are five."

"Kings through eight," corrected Ralph.

"Oh, all right. Kings through eight."

"And how much do I got to have to lay down?"

"Fifty until you get 1500. Then 90 and then 120 when you have 3000. Aren't I right, Ralphie?"

"Quite, my dear. Come on, Julie. Your play."

"Wait a minute," she protested, arranging her cards. She drew and discarded a four.

Emma Lou turned to Stanley. "Now don't forget your red threes. You get an extra draw if you've got one."

"Oh, pooh!" exclaimed Julie. "I've got one."

"That's all right, honey," said Emma Lou, consolingly. "We won't worry about it in the first game."

"Will, too," corrected Ralph. "That's a penalty, wife. Hundred points, I believe, unless you discard it. And you can't claim points either."

"But I haven't played in a long time."

Ralph drew and discarded an ace.

"You're mean," scowled Emma Lou. "And will you please explain why you discarded a perfectly good ace?"

The pile grew.

"Julie, please don't give it to Ralph. I'll never be able to play if he picks all that up."

Julie laid down a two.

"An act of pure desperation," said Ralph, shaking his head and clucking. He drew and offered a black three.

"Where did you get that blasted thing?" pouted Emma Lou.

"Saved it especially for you, sweetie."

"Well, I know Stanley doesn't have two fours," she said, discarding.

"Now," said Stanley, contemplating the pile, "if I want to pick that up can I do it if I got a wild card and a four?"

"No, no," said his wife. "You've got to have two fours 'cause the deck's frozen."

"And how much do I got to make?"

"Fifty. Now you'll know next time around."

"And what if I put this here four down, can I count that one there on top?"

"Not when the deck is frozen," explained Emma Lou. "Draw, Stanley."

"Then what if I put down two fours and this here joker, do I get 'em then?"

"Stanley, you wouldn't," screamed Emma Lou as he raked in the pile.

"A most unwise discard, sister-in-law. It shows a lack of intelligence."

"Shut up!" she pouted. "I'm going to put on some records."

"Let's hear Mama's new Tennessee Ernie album," suggested Julie.

"O lord, not that," moaned Ralph. "There's got to be a rule against such stuff."

"I'm ready," announced Stanley as the music began.

Julie winced. "Look at all that loot. He got two canastas out of that pile."

Ralph nodded left, accusingly. "Courtesy of Miss Emma."

"I wanna play," shouted Ranlo, running up behind his mother.

"You have to wait until you know how," said Emma Lou, turning her head. "Go play with Jenny Lou and Wanda."

"I tried to but they locked me out. Lemme watch."

"All right, sugar. But you've got to be quiet and not tell what we've got."

"I won't, I won't," the boy promised, gazing over her shoulder. "All I can see is a bunch of people."

"Ranlo!" screamed Emma Lou.

"Uncle Ralph, can we go for a ride?" pleaded Bascom from the door.

"Yes, you can," snapped Emma Lou. "But you got to take Ranlo with you. Give him the keys, Ralph."

"I thought this was supposed to be a respectable canasta game. Why can't we get some order around here? Craziest people I ever seen. Here. Anything to get back to the game."

"Have we gotta take Ranlo?"

No Ranlo, no go," said his mother as Ralph snickered.

"Wanna go, wanna go," chimed in the little boy.

"So do we," cried the girls, who had been listening from the hall.

"Ah, heck. there goes the fun, Gurn."

"Go!" ordered Ralph. "Begone, begoot, begot, scram."

Stanley leaned back and fanned a ponderous hand in front of his face. "I put that there three down for Julie. Heh-heh."

"I told you he'd do it," fussed Julie an hour later. "Sat there doing nothing and then went out. Look. I had two jokers and four kings."

"Just playing the game," said Ralph. "If you can't pick up, go out."

Emma Lou struggled up from the floor. "I want some peanuts. Count the points up for me."

"I will if you'll get me some cherry vanilla," said Julie.

"Same here," grinned Stanley.

"Bring me a scotch and soda," said Ralph.

"We don't have scotch and soda," snapped Emma Lou, exasperated.

"Then I'll share the peanuts."

"Great!" she said, heading for the kitchen.

"Watcha got there?" asked Stanley, after a few moments, craning his neck to see the scorepad.

"Ralph's got 4540, you have 4300, I've got 2380, and Emma Lou's got 1325."

"I see that the ladies are having their problems, Stanley. Could be they need some pointers."

Emma Lou returned. "I ain't had nothing, I ain't drawn nothin', and you ain't give me nothin'."

"I wish I'd drawn that low card and could sit where you are," complained Julie. "It makes me nervous having to discard to him. You mark my word. He'll try to go out with a concealed hand just for the drama of it, just like one of his stupid football teams winning in the last seconds."

"Stanley, my boy," meditated Ralph. "I think we should organize a club for oppressed husbands. We get no respect, no peace, and all the blame."

"Heh-heh," said Stanley, "I'll be the president."

"They're dealt," retorted Julie. "Would you two chauvinists like to play?"

Francine, revived, burst into the living room. "Let me show you the best recipe I just found in the microwave cookbook. It's called kabobs in jam—"

"Kabobs in jam?" interrupted Ralph, turning up his nose.

"And it's got orange marmalade, soy sauce, ginger, chicken, and brussel sprouts. And it cooks in nine minutes in a microwave."

"My mother's suspenders," moaned Ralph. "We got an important

canasta game going on here. Somebody play."

Emma Lou smirked, "It's your play, Ralphie."

He slid one off the top. "Dammit. I forgot about the red threes. I got two of the things. I demand relief. Man can't think straight with interruptions about kabobs in jam and ovens."

Julie smiled triumphantly. "We have to play by the rules, Ralph."

"And baked potatoes cook in fifteen minutes," added Francine.

"How many is it I got to meld?" questioned Stanley.

"One hundred twenty," answered Emma Lou, pressing her lips together and aiming a curt nod at him.

"And so does Ralph," said Julie. "I hope he doesn't get a single wild card."

"That's two hundred points I lost, all because of this stuff about microwaves. Wouldn't have one in my house even if it meant I starved."

"You will if you go out with a concealed hand," warned his wife, throwing a ten on the pile. "Go ahead. Take it so I won't have to worry."

Ralph drew and discarded an ace.

"I don't like it one bit," worried Emma Lou. "Here he needs a hundred and twenty and look what he puts on the pile."

"Bet the ol' boy's got some jokers," said Stanley, taking time to stuff some Red Man into his mouth. "Heh-heh."

"Well, I sure don't," complained Emma Lou, passing up the ace for a draw.

Francine returned, her arms filled with bottles. "What we all need is a glass of wine."

"Now this is my kind of interruption," said Ralph enthusiastically. "What you got there?"

"There's Mogen David concord grape, pina coconetta, this sweet white wine I got last year, and something the Jews drink."

"Gladly!" exclaimed Ralph, holding his stomach. "Don't you have anything else?"

"I got a jug of blackberry that Uncle Alvin made."

"Forget it," said Ralph, throwing up his hands. "I'll join the WCTU before poisoning myself with all that stuff."

"What you got against the WCTU?" asked Emma Lou.

"Cause they're like the DAR and the UDC and the NOW," grumbled Ralph.

"What's all them?" puzzled Stanley.

"Acronyms," explained Julie.

"Old biddies," said Ralph.

The kitchen door burst open. "We're home," came a chorus of voices.

"Bascom really knows how to drive, Mama," gushed Wanda.

Ranlo pushed his way to the table. "And, and I got to sit in the middle and one time the big needle got on the seven."

"Bascom," said his mother threateningly.

"Whose play is it?" moaned Ralph.

Francine scurried in behind the children, yelling, "The cat is in again. Find him before he gets in my closet."

"Here. Feawess, here, Feawess. There he is Maw Maw, right behind you. I got him. See Feawess, Uncle Ralph. Pet Feawess and he will always be your friend."

"He needs all he can get," said Julie.

"We got to finish the game," shouted Ralph. "If I live to be a hundred I'll—"

"Can we watch?" asked Gurney.

"Just be quiet," instructed his mother.

"Be quiet, Feawess."

The pile grew.

"I just know I'll give it to him," worried Julie as she turned a joker sidewise over the pile.

"Such extravagance," clucked Ralph, discarding a king.

Emma Lou stuck out her tongue at him and drew.

"What's the matter, Mama? Don't you have any more of those people?"

"Ranlo!"

Stanley drew and leaned back against the cushions. "Now what was it I had to meld?"

"One twenty."

"And I got to have at least one canasta to go out?"

"What's he up to, Emma Lou?" asked Julie.

"Not a thing. He just can't remember the rules."

"Now if I lay down these here five eights, and put my jokers with 'em, I got me a canasta, don't I?"

"Yes," agreed his wife. "But you'll strip your hand and not be able to do anything else."

"And if I put these three tens together I can lay them down too?"

"Stanley!"

"Then I can add a two to that and throw away this here black three?"

"And go out," whined Ralph, slamming his cards down. "With a concealed hand at that."

"How could you?" sputtered his wife.

"Well, I just put 'em down. Heh-heh."

"And I thought Ralph was bad. You men are all alike. Devious, sneaky."

"Add them up," said Julie, shaking her head. "Maybe he didn't reach 5000."

"Let's see. He got 300 for the canasta, 100 for going out and another 100 for the red three. His meld comes to 200 and that makes—"

"Exactly 5000," moaned Julie.

"I can't stand it," groaned Ralph. "Do you know that I needed only one card to do the same thing. All these interruptions about microwaves and cats and riding around. Must be something in the rules against such stuff."

"Heh-heh."

"Is the game over?" from Francine, returning.

"Daddy won, Maw Maw. And Uncle Ralph got mad and threw his cards down."

"Where's the cat?" she asked him.

"I put him in the chair to sleep. I guess he went to find a mouse."

"O lordy!" she cried, heading for her bedroom.

"Well," said Emma Lou, walking to the carport door, "I didn't do a thing. Get your coats, kids. Tomorrow's Friday and we'll be out about seven for another game. Isn't canasta the most fun you ever saw?" Then holding out her arms. "Big hugs, everybody."

"Oh, no, mercy, mercy," Francine wailed from the back of the house. Then she and Ranlo joined the others.

"He didn't," sympathized Julie.

"Lordy!"

"It's all right, Maw Maw," said Ranlo assuringly. "Daddy won't mind if you sleep in his room."

"We're playing again tomorrow night," said Julie to Francine. "Maybe Ralph will be in a better mood."

Emma Lou looked puzzled. "Where did he get to, by the way?"

"Oh," explained Francine, "he's still in the living room, adding up the score again. And if you'll excuse me, he's decided to have some of Alvin's blackberry wine after all."

"I might have known it," said Emma Lou, opening the door. "Come on, Jenny Lou. I'll tell you it's getting cold out there. Now don't you fix anything for us tomorrow night 'cause we'll eat before we come. Bye now. Come on. Where's my hug, everybody?"

"Hey, wait a minute," bellowed Ralph. "I've found an error. Stanley missed it by five." Then entering the kitchen. "Where'd they get to."

"They've gone," said Julie.

"But the game isn't over," he protested. "I tell you, this is the craziest family I ever saw, and I'll be damned if I know why I married into it."

James K. Taylor



